Because of temptations: children, sex and HIV/AIDS in Tanzania
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SUMMARY

This book details the results of an ethnographic research project, conducted between 2004 and 2008 with children (from 10 to 16 years of age) in Northwest Tanzania. The aim of the research was to investigate the children’s experiences with sex, the reasons children indicate they engage in sex, and what sex and relationships mean to them. In the literature, there are indications of early sexual debut of primary school students in the area and of sexual and reproductive health problems in this group including unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions and HIV infection suspected to be related to ‘sugar daddy’ relationships. Despite these indications, sexual and reproductive health interventions rarely target children under the age of 14 and in-depth studies of childhood sexuality are rare. To date, sexual health promotion efforts that target adolescents have had limited success in increasing safer sexual behavior among youth. The insights gained through this research help to explain why success has been limited, why children should be included as a target group and what issues need to be considered in order to improve the quality and success of SRHR interventions.

In order to collect data that represented the children’s ideas, experiences and (reported) actions, the children were the central informants of the study. With the help of an interpreter, I interviewed three groups of students attending: Nyahali School on the shore of Lake Victoria just outside Mwanza City; Magu Town School, a big market town 80 kilometres to the east of Mwanza; Kijiji Rural School, 20 kilometres inland from Magu Town. In addition, we interviewed children who were not attending school who came from a fishing village and nearby farmland area called Jabali. These children walked over an hour to meet us and were interviewed in an empty classroom in a school located between Mwanza City and Magu Town. The methodology that was used included active child participation as informants and as co-researchers. Children were not considered as passive recipients of adult culture who simply assimilate and reproduce it, but as active social agents in their own right, with their own experiences, perceptions and actions in the social and cultural world. A focus on agency allows for an analysis of the interplay between self and society; how socializing influences interact with individual goals and feelings as well as situational demands or circumstances. This theoretical approach helps to frame how children manage conflicting norms and

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expectations and how the manifestations of their agency (informed and directed by social structures) shape the characteristics of courtship and sexual relationships.

With the help of children I spoke to, it became clear how meanings of sex varied depending on the context and how a wide range of socializing influences, personal goals and feelings, future projects and situational aspects influenced their decisions and experiences regarding sex. Although some children experienced unwanted forms of sex (particularly in cases of power abuse by schoolteachers) or engaged in sex because of an immediate need caused by poverty, the majority of the sexually active children engaged in sex because they felt it benefited them socially and personally. Sex was important for children; for self esteem, peer status, to feel sophisticated and a wish to be (regarded as) ‘grown up’. Sometimes sex was used by boys and girls as a form of resistance against parental control or behavior. It provided girls with a means to take control over their own lives and become more independent from their parents. Since girls have few alternatives to obtain money, boyfriends provided girls with the needs that their parents cannot or would not provide. Boys mentioned a strong physical desire to make love when they reached puberty. Curiosity and wanting to test their bodies also played a significant motivational role, even for pre-pubertal boys. Love, infatuation and attraction interacted with other motivations and inhibitions. It appeared that some girls engaged in sexual relationships in the hope that the boy or (young) man would marry her and provide her with a good future. The strongest motivation for boys and girls not to engage in sex was related to the perception of the importance of education and the risk of being expelled if caught or pregnant. In general both boys and girls took active roles in courtship, in negotiating the meanings of sex, in optimizing the benefits, in reducing risks and in managing social and sexual relationships.

In the Tanzanian context there are many contradictory norms and expectations from peers and parents in regard to children and sex that are further conflicted by messages from NGO’s and the children’s own experienced emotional, bodily and financial needs. Children manage these conflicts through impression management and by hiding their sexual relationships. Due to parental control and regulation, there is limited space for boys and girls to get to know each other or develop intimacy through ‘dating’. Relationships are short and sometimes multiple. Courtship is described as taking place in secret and in a ‘deal’-like manner: boys approach girls when they are alone and dialogue is kept short and to the point. Money and gifts are used by boys to convince girls about their love and commitment and as an incentive to have sex.
Complex negotiation strategies are used by boys and girls to assess each other’s intentions and commitment, including strategies of self presentation, deception and ‘skinning’ (a girl accepting a boy’s money but not returning sexual favors). Money plays an ambivalent, but fundamental role in the negotiation of sexual relationships. From stories about harassment and unwanted sexual experiences it appears that expected reciprocity and secrecy facilitates boys’ persistence and sometimes leads to situations in which girls experience unwanted sex. Girls stated that they found it difficult to seek help or to report harassment and force due to secrecy and taboo. On the other hand, girls are skillful negotiators and many young boys say they are frustrated with girls who are ‘skinning’ them without receiving anything in return.

Consequences of larger socio-economic structures within the Tanzanian culture help shape ambiguous meanings of sex and characteristics of courtship and relationships. Examples of these cultural aspects are the practice of exchange for sex, limited space to develop intimacy, and relational aspects that are non-sexual (like friendship, love, commitment etc.). Children come to terms with these ambiguities by constructing temporary and permanent sexual relationships. Because every new sexual encounter must be negotiated, temporal relationships can be rapidly sequential, sometimes with the same partner(s), or exist simultaneously alongside a permanent relationship.

The narratives of the children help to understand how vulnerability is experienced and how risks are managed or become personalized. Debates between boys and girls illustrate how misconceptions and negative ideas about condoms come into existence or are reinforced. Their stories demonstrate how emotions can draw attention away from risks to more immediate concerns and how perceptions of responsibility influence risk taking. The social aspects of risk predominate in the children’s narratives. At stake is negative feedback from peers, parents and partners. The consequences impact the children’s feelings about themselves, their social support and their other relationships. These consequences are considered a higher risk than more abstract health risks such as HIV.

The insights gained from the ethnographic data collected throughout this qualitative participatory research with children begin to explain why prevention programs and health interventions often have limited success. Most interventions focus almost exclusively on the dangers of sex and therefore, inadequately address the children’s daily realities ignoring the experienced risks and benefits of their sexual relationships. Furthermore, professionals responsible for the sexual education of children and youth (i.e., teachers and local trainers) are
often insufficiently trained to work with children and adolescents. They do not sufficiently present the entire contents of the educational programs, due to their personal ideas about how respectful adult-child interactions should occur. In addition, some health education professionals believe that introducing topics related to sexuality can create adverse effects in children and adolescents. Incomplete or incorrect information given to children contributes to the creation or reinforcement of misconceptions. Lastly, current interventions do not sufficiently address the structural barriers that condition children’s sexual choices, such as poverty, a limited prospect of further education or official employment, secrecy and sexual taboos. A participatory and rights-based approach for health education interventions, based on research that actively involves children, could be a first step to improve the quality and success of sexual health promotion projects. In addition, these interventions should target children as well as youth as sexual decision making starts at younger ages and more gains will be made if children and youth receive information before becoming sexually active.